

The Servant Leader

Examining 1 Peter 5.1-6

12/15/2007

Water & Spirit Ministries

1 PETER 5.1-6

The exposition of 1 Peter 5.1-6 involves an examination of leadership within the church. Related to the issue of leadership are questions of structure (organization), authority, and the notion of submission. We should keep in mind that an important consideration of the disciples who would lead the church is the following admonition of Christ:

But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their leaders exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become leader among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.

Mark 10:42-44

The literary context of 1 Peter is a letter to the Christian communities. In this letter, Peter wished to encourage the church to remain faithful to the example of Christ despite the hostilities they faced from the general Roman population. Christians are required to live holy lives and are therefore “different” from those in the world, refusing to participate in the immoralities of the world; because we are different, the world will greet us with suspicion, disdain and resentment. We must, therefore, be prepared to suffer, just as Christ who is our example suffered. To lead the people of the church through these trials we have the elders, who are being addressed by Peter in this passage.

Reading the Scripture:

¹Therefore as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings, and one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I appeal to the elders among you:

²Be shepherds of God’s flock that is among you, watching over it, not because you must but because you want to, and not greedily, but eagerly as God desires.

³Do not lord it over the people entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock.

⁴Then, when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the victor’s crown of glory that will never fade away.

⁵In a similar way, you young people must be submissive to the elders. All of you must put on the apron of humility before one another, because

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you.

1 Peter 5.1-6 ISV

In this passage, we gain valued insight into the nature of leadership within the body of Christ. Peter describes himself as an elder, “a fellow elder.” He speaks to the elders as a peer, and it is important to note that he does not command but makes an appeal to the elders’ sense of duty and responsibility. Peter does not speak as one in a position of authority addressing those in position of subordination; rather he recognizes them as equals. This we find is in accordance with Christ’s admonition against obeisance and the exaltation of titles, and Christ’s emphasis on the equality of the body – as brethren:

“But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’ for One is your Teacher, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.

But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Matthew 23.8-12

We are not to worship at the altar of titles.

An examination of key terms and how these terms are interrelated offers an impressive view of the early church structure. We have already encountered the term “elder”; its meaning and use provides a sound starting point for an understanding of this passage.

“Elders” (presbyteros is the Greek term) is a comparative term that contrasts age, and means “the older ones”. It describes those of age and wisdom who were the heads of households; in the Jewish Qumran community, the age of 30 was the minimum required to serve as elder (this is thought to be the same age as Jesus when he began his ministry). The Jewish elders were older men noted for their wisdom and experience, the personal qualities that permitted a force of influence that was used to guide and lead their community. Elders operated as a council or college who judged, counseled or advised.

Elders in this passage refer to those select members of the church who were recognized for their maturity, wisdom and experience. The point to note is that the power of influence for elders was not due to their position or a formalized authority, but rather to their possession of personal qualities that others found admirable and worthy of emulation, and due to the esteem accorded their expertise and wisdom. This honors the admonition of Christ to not resort to the world’s custom of exercising authority and dominion.

Peter appealed to the elders to be shepherds. Just as the shepherd watches over and safeguards his flock, the elders are to watch over (or oversee) the church. Overseeing is a term synonymous with shepherding; the Greek for overseer is episkopos (translated bishop). Thus, the overseer (bishop) was not originally a title or office, but a description of the function or role of the elders – one of offering protective guidance to the church. Elders, shepherds and bishops were terms used interchangeably, as indicated by the following passage in which Paul is addressing the elders:

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of the Lord and God which He purchased with His own blood...” **Acts 20.28**

Peter also recalled the motivation for the servanthood of the elders. They oversee the church because they desire to do so. This desire is in no way selfish, but a desire to serve God.

Christ’s instructions to the disciples regarding the leadership style of the church consisted of two key stipulations that involved characteristics of how the world led its organizations. The first stipulation, they were not to lord over others, forbids rank; the second stipulation, they were not to exercise authority, forbids commands and directives. Rank and command are characteristics of the world’s formal structure of hierarchy with its vertical dimension and positional power. Here we find the superordinate positions (those of higher rank) who have authority to command and direct those in subordinate positions (those of lower rank). In a hierarchy, one possessed and exercised power by the virtue of an office or position that was held independent of one’s personal qualities. In other words, in a hierarchy the power or influence one had was a result of one’s title or office, and had nothing to do with one’s personal qualities.

Christ presented an alternative structure whose dimensional emphasis is the horizontal dimension of equality, fellowship, community and cooperation rather than the vertical dimension of dominion and subordination; Christ’s alternative structure represents an egalitarian organization of brethren in which leadership relies not on command authority but personal power, the influence of one’s character, wisdom and experience. Leadership is not by the force of commands or directives, but by example. The influence and guidance of the elders come from the examples they provide the flock.

I believe the derivation of this distinction is from Genesis 1.26:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Here we see that man is not granted dominion over his fellow man. Therefore, man is not to exalt his fellow man, for with the exaltation of man comes the risk of the expectation and demand of obeisance (homage, veneration and reverence) – a form of worship. We are to worship God only, therefore the organizational structure of the church is to be free of status and rank that would lend itself to false worship.

To the elders who are faithful in providing a Christ-like example to the flock, Christ will bring a crown of glory. For Christ is Lord, and those who are like him will share his glory upon his return. As Christ was a servant-leader, the elders are to be servant-leaders, emulating the Great Lord and Shepherd.

Just as the elders emulate the example of Christ, the Chief Shepherd, the younger converts are to learn from the example of the elders. The younger are asked to be "submissive" to the elders; this voluntary submission is more accurately an openness to the examples of the elders. An appeal is made for the young to have an open heart and mind to the guidance of the leaders, and do not be stubbornly closed to what they offer. This is not a prescription to mindlessly obey or accept the rule of others, but to be open to the goodness and quality of character that is presented by the elders – the benefit of their wisdom and experience.

The submissiveness that is asked of the younger is not an affront to equality or a suggestion of inferiority. It is a facilitation of the gifts of the Spirit. Elders were given the gift of wisdom, and the church must be open to the examples of the elders to receive the benefits of this gift.

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one *for the profit of all*: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. **1 Corinthians 12.7-10**

The equality of “brethren” is reinforced in the humility with which we live and serve. Christ provided a dramatic example of this when, during the Last Supper, he laid aside his garments (representing the laying aside the social norms of status and rank) and girded himself in the towel of humility as he washed the feet of the disciples. It is vitally important that we understand that in the church organization, the body of Christ, we serve each other not with rank but with “the apron of humility.” This is the new order of relationship, the order of the church.

It is our humility which prepares us for an exaltation by God at the appropriate time. Leadership in the church is not an occasion for exaltation; leadership, as with all roles of the church, is not an office to be occupied, but employment of the gifts granted by the grace of God and bestowed by the Holy Spirit. The gifts are used not to the praise of man, but to the praise of God whose grace provided the gifts, and so roles of the Church are not to the exaltation of man, but to the glory of God.

The world has only recently come to realize the wisdom of the leadership style advocated by Christ. This servant leadership that relies on personal rather than positional power is one that appeals to the hearts and minds of those who would follow. One is not enslaved to the coercive control of man’s dominion, as Christ has liberated us from the dominions and powers of the world and has no intention to have the Church emulate these fallen powers.

You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. **1 Corinthians 7.23**

Within the body of Christ, man is free to follow his heart, a heart renewed and made alive by the Spirit. It is through the open heart that we are guided; and with the love and humility of this heart, the Church finds unity.